



Above: The Flinders Range in Australia is part of the famous "Outback," and has provided the backdrop for films such as *Rabbit Proof Fence*.

The common image of a desert brings to mind a parched man begging for water while buzzards circle overhead, but in reality deserts are much more varied. In fact, four distinct types of desert cover 1/5 of the earth's surface, and range across every continent. The only major characteristic deserts share is aridity: deserts are classified as areas which receive less than 10 inches of annual rainfall.

The typical deserts most people picture are classified as subtropical deserts. Two key features describe these deserts: hot, and dry. While all deserts are arid, subtropicals are the



The Sigatoka Sand Dunes in Fiji make up the largest dune complex in the Pacific Islands.

most extreme. Rainfall ranges from almost none (the Inland Sahara desert averages about half an inch annually) to merely arid (most of the subtropical deserts in South America and North America receive about 10 inches each year). Due in part to these parched conditions, the evaporation rate can exceed the

rainfall rate; that means the rain can literally evaporate before it ever reaches the ground.

Because the air of subtropical deserts contains almost no humidity (which helps filter the sun's rays), temperatures can whipsaw to extremes. During the day,



Desert Blooms

Whether it's other-worldly scenes, images of never-ending isolation, or visions of sandswept beauty, deserts around the globe are hot locations.



Kaupo Valley, near Maui's South Shore in Hawaii, is a perfect example of a coastal desert. High elevations nearby receive moisture, creating arid conditions in the valley.

Gritty sand, as far as the eye can see. A blistering sun overhead. Desolate winds blowing unceasingly. What is it? A desert, of course.

Now try this one. Solid ice and snow. Temperatures below freezing. Plains of tundra rimmed by glaciers. What is it? Surprise: it's also a desert.

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they soak up more than twice the solar radiation of humid areas, and at night, they lose almost twice as much heat. That translates into daytime highs of 110+ degrees Fahrenheit (43.5 C) and nighttime lows of zero or below (-18 C). Major subtropical deserts include the Sahara (the world's largest), the Arabian, the Kalahari, most of the Australian deserts, and the Mojave, Sonoran and Chihuahan deserts of North and South America.

Coastal deserts are moderately cool deserts in the Nearctic and Neotropical areas of the world. They are usually adjacent to mountain ranges near the coast; clouds drop all their rain in the mountainous coastal regions, leaving no moisture for the area further inland. To an extent, the deserts of the Southwest United States mirror this coastal effect. The driest desert in the world, the Atacama of Chile, is a coastal desert; many years, it receives no precipitation at all.



Two deserts, opposite extremes: sand dunes in Fiji (left), and the Arctic Polar Region (right).

This effect can produce deserts in places better-known for lush, tropical scenery. For instance, the Sigatoka Sand Dunes in Fiji form the largest dune complex in the Pacific Islands. "Fiji is probably the last place you'd expect to find a desert-like environment," admits Wayne Covell of the Fiji Audio Visual Commission. Yet, there they are: only five minutes away from Fiji's famed island resorts.

But deserts aren't always associated with heat. Cold winter deserts are what their name suggests: deserts that experience cold winters with snowfall. Major cold winter deserts include the Great Basin (parts of Oregon, Nevada and Utah) and the Colorado Plateau (including the Grand Canyon) in the U.S.A., the Patagonian in Argentina, and the Gobi in China and Mongolia.

Additionally, the polar regions of the Arctic and the Antarctic are classified as deserts because they receive so little moisture; most of the moisture in these

Many people don't realize Oregon is two-thirds desert, with colorful vistas such as Lake County Desert Area pictured here.



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regions is locked in ice year-round. Landscapes are dominated by snow, glaciers and tundra.

This followed a two-year shoot at desert locations in Jordan and Morocco—a production schedule that took much longer than expected, in part because the sands and winds of the harsh environment combined to ruin cameras and other equipment. Despite these troubles, *Lawrence of Arabia* today remains memorable precisely because of its locations; people recall the golden hues of the desert topped by an azure sky with dreamy fondness.

A Joshua Tree near Palmdale, California.

Deserts on Film

Despite the harsh conditions of deserts, they can present landscapes of immense beauty. Indeed, many films and filmmakers have been drawn to subtropical deserts to help tell their stories.

Perhaps the most famous desert movie of all time is also famous for the toils it experienced while filming. In 1962, David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*, starring Peter O'Toole, hit theaters at a running time of nearly four hours.

If *Lawrence of Arabia* has a modern counterpart, it has to be *The English Patient*. The gorgeous, surrealistic desert scenes were shot in Tunisia, near the town of Tozeur. For centuries, Tozeur has hosted Bedouin caravans en route to the Mediterranean coast. In 1995, it hosted the cast and crew of *The English Patient* for nine weeks—as it happened, the final nine weeks of the film's production. One key location just outside of Tozeur was a vast, dry salt lake called the Chott el Jerid; in the film, it became the Almásy-Madox



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expedition's base camp. Near the Chott, filmmakers captured the breathtaking landscapes of unending sand dunes seen throughout the film. "The dazzling desert vistas in the Chott that seem like nothing more than an endless, limitless horizon gave a feeling of eternal space and timelessness," said Production Designer Stuart Craig.

Southern Australia's deserts, popularly known as "The Outback," have established a special niche as locations for science fiction and apocalyptic films. The breakthrough film, *Mad Max II: The Road Warrior*, lensed outside the desert towns of Broken Hill and Coober Pedy. Other sci-fi productions have

followed, including the Sci-Fi Channel's *Farscape* series, *Red Planet* (in which the Australian landscape doubled for Mars), and portions of the first two *Star Wars* prequels.

But Southern Australia's deserts have attracted more than just sci-fi productions. Broken Hill, a small city of about 20,000 residents, "has hosted more than 50 long-form

productions stretching back as far as 1969," according to Broken Hill Film Commissioner Andrew Plumer. Productions include *Mission Impossible II*, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, *Dirty Deeds* and *Wake in Fright*. Meanwhile, western Australia's Flinders Ranges area has been a backdrop for movies

Sugarloaf Mountain near Ridgecrest, California.



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such as *Holy Smoke* (starring Kate Winslett) and *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (directed by Philip Noyce).

In Nevada, which has (surprise, surprise) a few acres of desert, dry lake beds are particularly popular. One in Jean, just outside Las Vegas, has been used for such projects as *Nightbreakers* as well as numerous commercials. Up north past Reno, the Black Rock Desert gets annual attention (and documentary coverage) with the Burning Man cultural event. Plus, it's the site of the current world land speed record of 763.035 miles per hour.

Reno is even closer to Misfits Flat, which takes its name from the 1960 John Huston film with Marilyn Monroe. The

When producers of *The Mummy* (the Brandon Fraser version, not the Boris Karloff one) began work, they were also committed to shooting on location. An extinct volcano in the Sahara desert near Erfoud, Morocco gave them the perfect setting for their City of the Dead. Even so, shooting in the exotic Moroccan location proved to be a struggle. Temperatures reached 130 degrees Fahrenheit during the day—not the best conditions for film equipment (or actors and crew, for that matter). The hard work paid off, however, with *The Mummy* spawning huge box office receipts and successful sequels in *The Mummy Returns* and *The Scorpion King*.

Perhaps one of the most-filmed patches of desert is in

Arizona at Old Tucson Studios. Old Tucson was born in 1939 when Columbia Pictures chose the site to build a replica of 1860's Tucson for the movie *Arizona*. Over the next several decades, many of Hollywood's most memorable Westerns filmed at Old Tucson. In

Natives of Hawaii's Island of Lanai once placed shrines here, leading to the area's name: **The Garden of the Gods.**

director shot the film's finale there, with memorable scenes of Clark Gable being dragged across the desert by a wild mustang. Since then, the privately-owned flat has been used for many commercials, plus Gail Levin's recent PBS documentary on *The Making of The Misfits*. The flats also serve as a final resting place for Gary Oldman in the feature film *Sin*.

Nevada's other desert includes dunes at Sand Mountain and Amargosa Valley (seen in *Cherry 2000*) and the mix of sand and rock that duplicated the Sea of Galilee in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.

the 1950's, that included *Gunfight at the OK Corral* with Burt Lancaster and Kirk Douglas and *Cimarron* starring Glen Ford. In the 1960's, John Wayne rode into Old Tucson for *Rio Bravo*, *McClintock*, *El Dorado* and *Rio Lobo*. In the 1970s and 80s, television productions such as *Little House on the Prairie* and *Gunsmoke* came to Old Tucson, along with features ranging from *The Outlaw Josey Wales* to *The Three Amigos*. Today, more than six decades after its founding, Old Tucson is a busy studio and theme park that proudly calls itself America's "Hollywood in the Desert."

Left to right: Saskatchewan sand hills, Canada; Misfit Flats, Nevada; Molokai Ranch, Maui; Antelope Valley, California.





The Trona Pinnacles in Ridgecrest, California recently became a gatekeeper's castle in a Skittles commercial.

Also in Arizona, a dry lake bed about 20 miles outside of Kingman became the site for one of the strangest alien landings in Hollywood history. For *Mars Attacks*, filmmakers erected grandstands festooned with banners proclaiming "Welcome to Earth" in the middle of a dry lake bed, then brought in 1,200 cast, crew and extras—including a vast army of tanks, helicopters and other Army equipment. Heat and wind presented problems, but those were miniscule compared to the psychotic Martians that landed there in the film's narrative.

California's San Diego County is home to the 600,000 acre Anza Borrego Desert State Park, the largest desert parkland in the United States. The park has hosted projects ranging from car



Red Rock Canyon State Park is a geologic wonder in the Mojave Desert.

commercials to classic films. As far back as 1928, filmmakers were drawn to the area; that's the year Wallace Beery filmed *Beggars of Life*. More recent productions have included *The Scorpion King* and the *X-Files* television series.

Farther north in California's Mojave Desert is the Ridgecrest area and its many unique desert features. Mining camps from the 1800s have hosted film productions such as

Jean-Claude Van Damme's *Inferno*. Randsburg, a living desert ghost town has a three-block main street straight from 1895 (most of the structures are original). It's hosted the Johnny Depp-helmed *The Brave*, Kirstie Alley's *Nevada*, and that well-known classic of cinema, *Chopper Chicks in Zombietown*. And the Trona Pinnacles are unique "tufa" peaks you've probably seen starring as an alien planet in productions such as the *Lost in Space* television series, Tim Burton's *Planet of the Apes*, and *Star Trek V*.

Utah's Bonneville Salt Flats, famous as a site where past land speed records have been set, has also seen more than its share of film; in fact, more than 60 productions have visited. The flats have a high concentration of salt, which inhibits any kind of growth—nothing but a stark, white landscape. This starkness explains part of the location's popularity with filmmakers. Working in the Salt Flats is like working with a blank slate: crews can transform the area into just about any kind of location. For Nick Nolte's *Mulholland Falls*, the Flats doubled as a nuclear testing site; in *Independence Day*, they were the setting for a military camp. For a Lexus auto commercial, the Flats were an otherworldly setting where metal spikes rose from the ground. Another automobile commercial, for Toyota, gave the Salt Flats perhaps its greatest transformation: it portrayed them as a snow-covered mountain pass.

And so, deserts are locations yielding a surprising variety of environments—from blistering heat to ice-locked glaciers—and an equally surprising variety of location possibilities. All around the world, on every continent, the deserts bloom with possibility.